United Nations A/53/PV.1

General Assembly

Fifty-third Session

Official Records

1st plenary meeting
Wednesday, 9 September 1998, 3 p.m.
New York

Temporary President: ..... Mr. Udovenko (Ukraine)

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Item 1 of the provisional agenda

Opening of the session by the Chairman of the delegation of Ukraine

The Temporary President: I declare open the fifty-third session of the General Assembly.

Item 2 of the provisional agenda

Minute of silent prayer or meditation

The Temporary President: Before calling on representatives to observe a minute of silent prayer or meditation in accordance with rule 62 of the rules of procedure, I propose that as we do so we also observe the International Day of Peace on this the opening day of the regular session of the General Assembly, as proclaimed by the General Assembly in its resolutions 36/67 of 30 November 1981 and 52/232 of 4 June 1998, to be devoted to commemorating and strengthening the ideals of peace both within and among all nations and peoples.

I now invite representatives to stand and observe one minute of silent prayer or meditation.

The members of the General Assembly observed a minute of silent prayer or meditation.

Item 121 of the provisional agenda

Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations (A/53/345)

The Temporary President: Before turning to the items on our agenda, I should like, in keeping with the established practice, to invite the attention of the General Assembly to document A/53/345, which has been circulated in the General Assembly Hall this afternoon. It contains a letter addressed to me by the Secretary-General in which he informs the Assembly that 19 Member States are in arrears in the payment of their financial contributions to the United Nations within the terms of Article 19 of the Charter.

I should like to remind delegations that, under Article 19 of the Charter,

> "A Member of the United Nations which is in arrears in the payment of its financial contributions to the Organization shall have no vote in the General Assembly if the amount of its arrears equals or exceeds the amount of the contributions due from it for the preceding two full years."

May I take it that the General Assembly duly takes note of this information?

It was so decided.

98-85744 (E)

This record contains the original text of speeches delivered in English and interpretations of speeches delivered in the other languages. Corrections should be submitted to original speeches only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and be sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned, *within one month of the date of the meeting*, to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, Room C-178. Corrections will be issued after the end of the session in a consolidated corrigendum.

Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda

Credentials of representatives to the fifty-third session of the General Assembly

(a) Appointment of the members of the Credentials Committee

The Temporary President: Rule 28 of the rules of procedure provides that the General Assembly at the beginning of each session shall appoint, on the proposal of the President, a Credentials Committee consisting of nine members.

Accordingly, it is proposed that, for the fifty-third session, the Credentials Committee should consist of the following Member States: China, Fiji, Jamaica, Mali, New Zealand, Russian Federation, United States of America, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

May I take it that the States I have mentioned are hereby appointed members of the Credentials Committee?

It was so decided.

Item 4 of the provisional agenda

Election of the President of the General Assembly

The Temporary President: I now invite members of the General Assembly to proceed to the election of the President of the General Assembly at its fifty-third session.

May I recall that, in accordance with paragraph 1 of the annex to General Assembly resolution 33/138, the President of the General Assembly at the fifty-third session should be elected from among the Latin American and Caribbean States.

In this connection, I have been informed by the Chairman of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States that the Group has endorsed the candidacy of His Excellency Mr. Didier Opertti of Uruguay for the presidency of the General Assembly.

Taking into account the provisions of paragraph 16 of annex VI to the rules of procedure, I therefore declare His Excellency Mr. Didier Opertti of Uruguay elected President of the General Assembly at its fifty-third session by acclamation.

I extend my sincere congratulations to His Excellency Mr. Didier Opertti and I invite him to assume the Presidency.

I request the Chief of Protocol to escort the President to the podium.

Mr. Didier Opertti took the Chair.

Address by Mr. Didier Opertti, President of the General Assembly at its fifty-third session

The President (*interpretation from Spanish*): I would like with my first words to express sincerely and with emotion what a great honour it is for my country, Uruguay, to have been nominated by consensus — I emphasize, by consensus — by the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States to preside over the fifty-third session of the United Nations General Assembly and to have subsequently received the endorsement of this body.

I wish to convey my country's deepest gratitude to all of you and to extend my personal commitment to work with the 185 delegations that make up this body, with a view to conducting business in a manner in keeping with the responsibilities that the Charter and the rules of procedure of the General Assembly assign to the President.

I must not fail to mention here that the honour and responsibility of presiding over the General Assembly have been conferred on my country, Uruguay, a country of open borders and a full member of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), a country which won its political independence in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Since then Uruguay has presented itself to the world without inappropriate ambitions or political prejudices and as a proponent of a steadfast internationalist vocation based on peace, tolerance and mutual respect, all under the protective guarantee of the rule of law. Uruguay cast its foundational vote in favour of the creation of this singular phenomenon of twentieth century civilization that is the United Nations and participates today in a professional manner, even making the ultimate sacrifice in terms of Uruguayan lives in peacekeeping operations in various parts of the world.

I undertake before all of you to conduct the work of the Assembly in a manner reflecting my status as a Uruguayan, which implies a humanistic, conciliatory and unprejudiced vision of the world. It is also on the basis

of that vision that I respectfully make an appeal to all States represented here to endeavour to reach an understanding that will enable us to identify common and universal interests that will make the United Nations an irreplaceable setting in which, to quote the great Uruguayan jurist, Irureta Goyena,

> "we can reconcile the transparency of principles with the opaqueness of reality".

I must thank in particular the President of the fifty-second session, my distinguished colleague, Ambassador Hennadiy Udovenko of Ukraine, who has given his best efforts and has also generously briefed me on the experience he gained in his year as President, sharing with me his satisfactions and his concerns and, fundamentally, his solid trust in the future of the Organization and its strengthening, which is tantamount to placing one's trust in peace, development and security — in sum, in the progress of the peoples that make up the United Nations.

The guidance provided by Mr. Udovenko and the working group dealing with the review of the membership of and decision-making in the Security Council constitutes very valuable background and adds to the significant efforts made in that respect by his predecessors. His address marking the closure of the fifty-second session of the General Assembly is a document of substance that should be considered in all its aspects.

I should like now to address the Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, to assure him once again that work will be coordinated with him and his entire team so as to ensure that the efforts and competencies of each body are successfully combined. We have been greatly impressed by the Secretary-General's efforts to identify the scope of his responsibilities and goals and the very future of the Organization. His personal visits to our region and his contacts with heads of State there have enabled us to appreciate the role that the Secretary-General plays directly with Governments.

Conducting the business of the General Assembly in the current international circumstances is an activity that can be carried out only if we can count on the commitment and goodwill of each one of us, always bearing in mind that this Organization gives rise to many high expectations among the Governments and peoples of its Member States and that we must meet these expectations decisively and in a spirit of tolerance, tirelessly seeking to achieve the necessary agreements and understandings to solve the wide range of pressing problems that will be discussed in this forum.

The serious disruptions in financial markets and their adverse effects on national economies, even in those countries that did not give rise to this situation, in an inescapably globalized context; the dramatic resurgence of acts of terrorism and the appearance of the dialectic of force brought about by that resurgence; the nefarious effect of drugs on those who take them and a sophisticated distribution system that takes on forms of criminal organization and which involves the various stages of the drug-trafficking cycle; the increase in international crime and the insecurity of citizens; the protection needed by underprivileged individuals and peoples; the protection of nature and the environment, which are under attack; human rights in their most genuine manifestations; and, finally, the achievement of social peace — these are among the most striking challenges facing the United Nations, most of which it has already taken under its responsibility.

Of course, this is not to forget the support to development, cooperation in the fields of education, science and technology, the fight against disease, and many other examples. These include the codification and development of international law, a task as silent as it is wide-ranging and effective.

These are just some of the items that cannot be left out of the current international agenda of the United Nations by virtue of its essentially multilateral nature.

The San Francisco Charter of 1945 was a response to the determination to avoid war, and the structure of the Organization and the integration and competence of its bodies were geared to that end. But today, further consideration must be given to the issue of redesigning and agreeing on a new United Nations, and the current 185 Members must conclude the essential agreements that, on the basis of respect for justice and international law, will make every Member State feel unreservedly responsible for the preservation of those values, without which neither the United Nations nor any other international organization would have any real importance or representativeness.

To assert that the United Nations is a composite of the entire world would perhaps be a reductionist and inaccurate simplification. However, it would be extremely difficult to imagine a world without the United

Nations or one in which we could not depend on an organization of this nature carrying out similar tasks.

The task of reforming the Charter, on which an open-ended working group has been engaged under the provisions of a resolution adopted by the General Assembly in 1995, is taking place in that context. That is also the context in which expectations are expressed and appeals for greater participation are made by countries — above all by their peoples — that have placed in the United Nations most of their hopes for greater democratization and for a better, more balanced, more secure, more equitable world which, while acknowledging historical, religious, cultural, economic, scientific and technological differences, can give rise to agreements at a basic level and take into account the person as an individual, or organized within society, as the epicentre of programmes and action and above all as their inspiration.

We believe that this last factor, which could be regarded as abstract or even to some degree unreal or lacking in pragmatism, acts as the compass for an international community that daily displays signs of almost magical modernity but which, with respect to fundamentals, also reveals alarming reversals that bring the international situation to levels of contradiction that oblige us to rely on ethical values and basically shared responses.

Under the Charter, the Security Council has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security and must act on behalf of Member States in carrying out its duties in accordance with that responsibility. Appropriate coordination is therefore required between the General Assembly and the Security Council, as a key principle governing their relationship, so that the acts of both bodies carried out within the framework of their competence can be regarded as the shared resources of the Organization with its current form of decision-making. This does not imply, in and of itself, either a positive or a critical evaluation of the institutional structure, which dates from more than half a century ago; nor is it an obstacle to the review that is already fully under way.

It should be added that that half-century produced the most spectacular scientific and technological advances, and the political transformations that have occurred at both the national and the international levels in the past decade have been so intense and dynamic they have not been accompanied by similarly rapid institutional development.

It can be said without exaggeration that the twenty-first century is upon us. However, the speed of change and the formal certainties of the Charter cannot be regarded as irreconcilable. On the contrary, this should prompt us to continue steadily, but without haste, on the course on which we have already embarked towards modernizing and fine-tuning the Organization. This should be not a mere diplomatic or legal exercise, but a natural political response by States, and one that cannot be postponed, consisting in the continuing improvement of the only universal instrument that the world has for bringing about its agreements and arbitrating its misunderstandings in accordance with the law and the principles of justice.

It is perhaps appropriate to recall here that the problems that the Organization faces today differ from those of the past. In the past 10 years, only half a dozen of the more than 100 conflicts that breached international peace and security were territorial conflicts. However, in some cases these conflicts became attacks on the security of individuals and the stability of institutions, as well as, on occasion, on the peace of entire regions of the world.

Creating a favourable climate for consideration of these issues in a way that is progressive, promoting an *animus societatis* among all Member States, is perhaps our main goal. I shall put my presidency at the service of that goal, excluding no State and in accordance with the Charter and the rules of procedure, with your support and the assistance of the Secretariat, in such General Assembly forums as committees, commissions and working groups — in short, with the support and assistance of all those who are involved in the annual session and who experience it as a forum which, although it may be routine and announced in advance, does not thereby forfeit any of its interest or importance.

Of course, the list of challenges and issues before the United Nations is not confined to the systematic and orderly cataloguing of the agenda, which is certainly indispensable and whose consideration is the General Assembly's primary duty, so that a decision can be taken in each case.

As they unfold, international events transform the United Nations into a sounding board and focus of attention for peoples and Governments, non-governmental organizations and sectors, analysts and observers, communicators and journalists and, above all, those who, full of hope, are endeavouring to transform their individual problems into a common cause.

The United Nations has not resolved, nor will it be able to resolve, all problems and conflicts to which international coexistence gives rise. The Secretary-General is constantly endeavouring to reduce his budget, but he will be unable to go beyond a certain point without running the risk of triggering a crisis throughout the entire system. Consequently, there will always be a high level of dissatisfaction and criticism, of varying intensity according to the source. However, perhaps nothing would be more dangerous than, under the influence of such criticism, to disregard the extremely important achievements of the United Nations in a wide range of fields; these must be considered and accepted as achievements by all humankind, as demonstrated by the steady increase in the number of Members of the Organization.

Let us all take care of this Organization, and even as we acknowledge and draw attention to its shortcomings, let us not allow scepticism to spread and make us lose heart. Let us renew our original commitment to peace and progress as essential values, without prior exceptions, sectarianism or the unproductive freezing of international relations.

Let us view with the greatest clarity and realism possible the critical points that can jeopardize the Organization, but let us not confuse the substantive and the procedural, or that which is of key importance with that which is of secondary importance. However, it must also be said frankly that we will be able to do little — or very little — if States do not fulfil their commitments to the Organization. We offer the Secretary-General our cooperation in the diligent action he is taking in that connection.

Let us acknowledge that the transformation of the United Nations is both quantitative and qualitative; not only must it take place within the system and its organs and agencies, but it must extend to the conduct of States themselves, to their relations with one another, to regional relations and to the links between bodies within the Organization itself.

In substantive terms, the condemnation of and fight against terrorism, developments in nuclear disarmament — to which Latin America bears witness — and human rights, the ongoing protection of children and women, the protection of minorities and displaced persons, appropriate trial before a competent court for those guilty of the most serious crimes against humanity and the fight against disease, marginality and extreme poverty, among other issues, are challenges that can be met only if we upgrade our tools for responding to them, both at political level and at the level of the Secretariat.

In this context, we must evaluate fairly the United Nations achievements to date. The forthcoming fiftieth anniversaries of the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the launching of the first peacekeeping operation are eloquent manifestations of the achievements we are celebrating today.

Finally, attention should also be drawn to coordination between the United Nations and other international organizations; to the promotion of economic integration mechanisms as one of the most effective strategies in working to achieve peace and secure borders through trade and cooperation; and to the encouragement of all effective forms of preventive diplomacy.

In conclusion, my friends, I invite all to join me for a year in moving resolutely along a path that will present us with difficulties, but will also fully open the way to hope and be based on the desire to serve a just cause.

The meeting rose at 3.40 p.m.